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Running Head: Understanding School Mission Statements

An Empirical Approach to Understanding and Analyzing the Mission Statements of Selected Educational Institutions

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Descriptors: mission statements, content analysis, emergent coding, purpose of school, philosophy of education

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, content analysis was used to examine the mission statements of 267 educational institutions over four clusters (elementary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary). Ten major themes emerged from the data. The relative frequencies of each major theme were computed across the sample. The results of the study indicate that the purpose of school shifts from emotional development in the early levels of schooling to cognitive development at the college level. In addition, mission statements vary greatly both within and between school levels with most schools emphasizing four different themes in their mission statement. Relevant policy implications and suggestions for further research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

What is the purpose of schooling in American society? How do educational goals differ across levels and how do they reinforce one another? Present controversies in admissions policies in such cases as Wessmann v. Boston Latin at the high school level, and Hopwood v. Texas on the post-secondary level have served to rekindle the dialogue about the purpose of schooling. Both of these major cases address the tension between policies that use race as a factor in admission vs. policies that are based entirely on test scores. Each policy reflects a different perspective on the purpose of school. An analysis of mission statements will provide a framework for understanding the range of themes emphasized across American educational institutions.

Before advancing any further, let us stop to examine the nature of our underlying premise. The assumption that underlies the question "What is the purpose of schooling" is that there is only one purpose. Before the educational community can proceed with a discussion about what the dominant purpose of education should be, it would be useful to know the variety and range of mission statements of educational institutions as they presently stand. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which educational institutions vary in their expressed purposes found in their mission statements.

Because much of the groundwork relating to the purpose of the American schooling has been laid in the philosophical realm, it is necessary to summarize some of this vast literature. The philosophical debates revolving around the purpose of schooling are old and varied and the brief review presented in this paper is far from comprehensive. The purpose of this cursory review of the literature is to provide the reader with some

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context that will both justify the relevance of the current study and aid in the understanding and the interpretation of the results.

Philosophical perspectives

It seems reasonable to expect that actions taken in the school ought to follow from the school's statement of purpose. Tyler has noted that, "If the faculty examines the things that are taken for granted in the points of view of staff members, in the rules and regulations and practices of the school, it is often possible to modify those markedly so as to develop a more unified environment that will help to emphasize social attitudes." (1949, p. 77). Airasian concurs when he suggests, " . . . that any particular view of the purpose of education leads to a unique set of organizational, instructional, and assessment practices." (1997, p. 64). Furthermore, "It is certainly true that in the final analysis objectives are a matter of choice, and they must therefore be the considered value judgments of those responsible for the school. A comprehensive philosophy of education is necessary to guide in making these judgments." (Tyler, 1949, p.4). Over time, several comprehensive philosophies have been advanced.

Tanner & Tanner point out, "In the 1830's and 1840's moral education permeated the entire curriculum. The subject matter of textbooks was heavily flavored with morality, and teachers gave lessons in morals and character building." (1990, p. 38). Marrietta Johnson adds that, "The school has always claimed its chief purpose to be the development of a fine moral sense, a good character. But in spite of this claim, we note that pupils are always promoted on mental attainment and achievement. Many people of splendid morals have been refused graduation." (1996, p. 166). Indeed, one of the oldest

and most recurrent philosophical arguments is that *the purpose of school is to foster emotional development.*

Yet, by the 1880's, the focus of schools had shifted dramatically. They add that in that era the dominant view was that, "The purpose of education was not to learn a method of investigation, said the conservative; it was to occupy the mind with the recorded wisdom of the human race." (Tanner & Tanner, 1990, p. 91). Furthermore, the doctrines of *laissez-faire* and individualism had a profound impact upon the vision of schools in American society. "Faith in the individual and the power to get ahead were (and still are) familiar American doctrines. The idea implicit in *laissez-faire* is that nothing should limit or impede the free action of the individual; success or failure depends on self-effort . . . . and helping the unfit to become fit by curriculum adaptation is out of the question: it would only defeat the purpose of the system, which is to weed out those unable to profit from a curriculum aimed at developing intellectual power." (Tanner & Tanner, 1990, p. 106). Thus, the 1880's introduced a second philosophical perspective, that *the purpose of school was solely to foster cognitive development.*

"In 1909 historian Ellwood P. Cubberley pointed out that well before 1900 the school had experienced a shift in purpose and direction. Said Cubberley: 'The task is thrown more and more upon the school of instilling into all a social and political consciousness that will lead to unity amid diversity, and to united action for the preservation and betterment of our democratic institutions.'" (Tanner & Tanner, 1990, p. 113). Indeed, "Jefferson wanted to create state primary schools to make loyal citizens of the young. In addition, many early theorists wanted a national university to prepare and legitimate elites for leadership." (Tyack in Jaeger, 1988, p. 35). At the same time,

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Benjamin Franklin had begun to champion the notion that the school curriculum should become more utilitarian, serving to prepare students for their future vocation (Tanner & Tanner, 1990). Here we are confronted with yet another perspective, that *the purpose of school is to promote effective citizenship and vocational preparation* .

In the 1930's we begin to find another twist on the citizenship theme emerging. "The Educational Frontier, the defining philosophical statement of education in the 1930's held that, 'The aim of education was still to enable human beings to understand their environment so that they could control it rather than being controlled by it and, in their control, make a better world with each succeeding generation.'" (Tanner & Tanner, 1990, p. 218). Here we are introduced to the idea that schools should instill social responsibility, an element of effective citizenship that also implies mature social development.

The notion of effective citizenship can also be connected with the idea of community pride. Berliner and Biddle point out that, "In response to the progressive agenda, American schools are also likely to provide services for the wider community - to assume responsibility for some forms of *public entertainment*, *community enlightenment*, and the *creation of community spirit*." (1995, p. 262 emphasis in original). R.M. Latanision argues that the purpose of school is "to make it possible for individuals to live together in amity, working for common purposes." (quoted in Holton & Goroff in Daedalus, 1995, p. 5). Given the diversity of students coming from various backgrounds, community pride was strengthened through participation in social activities, school government, and athletics (Tanner & Tanner, 1990). With this goal in mind, "the more differentiated the curriculum, the more important the student's social mingling." (Tanner

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& Tanner, 1990, p. 122). Here we encounter a more recent perspective, that *the purpose of school is to foster social development and community involvement.*

In summary, it is clear that there are varying opinions about the primary aims of American education. Furthermore, the majority opinion on this issue has shifted over time. We have heard arguments stating that the purpose of school is to foster emotional development, cognitive development, citizenship and vocational preparation, social development, and community pride. Many of the philosophical differences are so striking that it would be inconceivable for a school to espouse all points of view. It is here that the crux of this paper lies. If differences are found to exist between schools regarding their beliefs about the primary function of schooling in American society, shouldn't this be reflected in the school's mission statement?

By examining the fundamental purpose of school through their mission, we hope to stimulate dialogue concerning role of colleges and K-12 schools in America. To this end, we have constructed an empirical framework for understanding and analyzing educational mission statements.

Using Mission Statements

There has been a great deal of speculation regarding the relevance of a school's mission statement and the meaning (or lack thereof) contained by such statements (see Flake, 1997). In response to this controversy, there have been prior studies designed to systematically examine the nature of school mission statements. A study by Harvanek and Berleur (1997) examined the mission statements or related documents of 52 Jesuit universities throughout the world. The authors used both an inductive and a deductive

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approach to coding their statements paying particular attention to those traits that are assumed to be characteristic of Jesuit universities. The methodology focused on such objective measures as word and phrase count in the various mission statements. A study by Strobel (1997) also used the technique of content analysis to analyze a sample of 120 mission statements published by colleges and universities accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. The methodology used in this study went beyond word and phrase count to incorporate major themes found across the universities. Each of these studies examined the mission statements of post-secondary institutions.

Prior studies of educational mission statements have been time consuming and expensive given the traditional problems that accompany obtaining written documentation from a large sample of educational institutions. In the present study, the introduction of the world wide web (WWW) has opened up new possibilities in the arena of data collection by giving researchers access to a variety of school documentation on-line. With the proliferation of technology, more and more schools are posting relevant school documentation on-line, a trend that will only continue to increase in the future. This method of obtaining documents is not without its own limitations, but it does provide many benefits. Documents can be obtained quickly and easily on-line without any mailing or phone costs. Another benefit is that the researcher is empowered to take an active role in obtaining the documentation rather than having to wait for the appropriate officials to respond to their written or verbal requests.

Research Hypotheses

The current study was designed to assess the variability of selected themes incorporated into school mission statements. The study was also designed to detect differences between the frequency of these thematic elements across four clusters: elementary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary institutions. After reviewing the literature on educational philosophy, the authors fully expected to find differences between schools reflected by their mission statements. Specifically, the authors expected that these differences would vary systematically over the different levels of American education.

This study examines two seemingly innocuous hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that not all post-secondary institutions are attempting to accomplish the same things. Stated differently, the first hypothesis is that there is significant variability between schools in both the kind and the number of themes they are emphasizing in their mission. The second hypothesis is that there is a systematic difference between the mission statements of elementary, middle, high schools, and colleges in American society. While the hypotheses themselves are rather simple, the implications of the findings should influence the multiple dimensions of the experience of formal schooling in the United States.

METHODOLOGY

Operational Definition

In order to conduct an investigation into the purpose of school, it was necessary to establish an operational definition of "the purpose of school". For this study, the

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researchers chose to operationally define the purpose of school as the views expressed in a school's mission statement. Although there were many documents that could have been used in conducting our analysis, for the sake of consistency only documents that were listed on school websites and labeled "mission statement" were used.[1]

Population and Sample

The theoretical population we were interested in studying consists of all of all K-12 schools in the United States (n•108,000) schools and all four-year colleges in the United States (n•1900) (Peterson, 1999; American School Directory, 1999). Practically speaking, however, it was necessary to take a sample from that population. In approaching the issue of sampling, we first needed a practical population from which to draw our sample. Three criteria were used for selecting our practical population. The first criterion was that the practical population should represent a relatively large number of schools. The second criterion was that schools from all 50 states be represented. The third criterion was that these schools could be accessed via a master website containing active links to a large number of schools with websites. Clearly, not all schools in the United States have web sites. Therefore, the practical population was defined as all of the American K-12 schools and colleges whose websites were linked to one of two comprehensive sites (one for K-12 schools, one for colleges).

The Gleason-Sackman page (http://www.gsn.org/hotlist/) met the selection criteria for the current study and was the most exhaustive list of elementary, middle, and secondary school websites at the time. The Gleason-Sackman site also included a

[1] When analyzing the college mission statements, statements of purpose were substituted in the rare instances (n=4) where the mission statement where unavailable.

cumulative index page listing the number of schools linked to their website. At the time the population was drawn (Spring 1997), there were a total of 2020 K-12 schools in the United States linked to the site. When selecting the college sample (Spring 1998), a non-commercial site (http://www.clas.ufl.edu/CLAS/american-universities.html) was found which alphabetically listed approximately 1500 public and private four year universities across the United States. Thus our practical population consisted of the elementary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary educational institutions listed on these two sites.

A random sample was taken from each of the four populations. The procedure used to carry out the sampling involved three steps.

- Electronically copy, state by state, the schools listed in the relevant cluster and paste the names of those schools into a Microsoft Excel file.
- The schools listed in the file were then assigned a random number by Excel.
- The schools were sorted by random number in ascending order for each cluster creating 4 separate randomly sampled databases: elementary, middle, secondary and college.

Yield Rate of Mission Statements

After the sample was constructed it was then necessary to collect our data. In elementary schools, 254 sites were searched and 59 (23%) had mission statements readily available[2]. In middle schools, 254 sites were searched and 49 (19%) had mission statements readily available. In secondary schools, 267 sites were searched and 59 (22%) had mission statements readily available. In post-secondary schools, 187 sites were searched and 100 (53%) had mission statements readily available. It is notable to consider that college websites generally exhibited mission statements that were more easily

[2] The authors resolved to search the school websites for the mission statement only for an amount of time they felt was reasonable. In some cases it is possible that some of the websites visited did actually list a mission statement that the author's may have overlooked because it was not in a predominant place on the web site. Other concerns detailing the sample are included in the discussion.

available and apparent than elementary, middle and high schools. It is estimated that as internet technology continues to grow, school websites will become more developed, undoubtedly increasing the yield rate of mission statements. Table 1 displays the yield rates across clusters.

Table 1: *Yield rates of mission statements per cluster*

Cluster	Total sites visited	Number of sites with mission statements	Yield Rate
Elementary	254	59	23%
Middle	254	49	19%
High	267	59	22%
College	187	100	53%
Total	**962**	**267**	**28%**

Procedure

A coding scheme was developed using the technique of emergent coding. The process of emergent coding is described in detail by Fierros, Gulek, and Wheelock (1997). The main methodological steps as applied in the current study are detailed below:

1. A random sample of school mission statements was selected from each cluster.
2. An initial list of 60 mission statements (15 per cluster) was used to develop the coding scheme. The two researchers independently extracted the dominant themes that emerged from the sample of statements.
3. The two researchers met and reached a consensus as to the major themes. From these themes, an explicit coding scheme was instituted. Specifically, it was decided that the coding scheme would be dichotomous in nature and would contain 10 major themes each with a varying number of thematic elements (Table 3).
4. The rater agreement (reliability) of the newly devised coding scheme was assessed using inter-rater and intra-rater agreement measures (reported below).
5. The authors then proceeded to independently code the remaining 247 mission statements (total = 267) between the two of them.

Computing the rater agreement across major themes

The purpose of establishing the reliability of the coding scheme used in this study was not to measure whether raters came to the "correct" conclusion about the presence or absence of major themes. Rather, the purpose was to assess the extent to which the raters agreed when attempting to apply the themes to various school mission statements (i.e. rater agreement). In the current project we have attempted to document the rater agreement of the major themes in the developed coding scheme by specifically analyzing the:

1. inter-rater agreement amongst the principal researchers (n=2),
2. inter-rater agreement amongst independent participants (n=4), and
3. intra-rater agreement over an 8 week period.

There are a number of ways to quantitatively report the agreement ratings for inter-rater and intra-rater agreement. In attempting to assess the reliability of a coding scheme, the simplest measure of rater agreement would be the overall percent agreement. This technique is limited for this analysis, however, because there is a substantial difference in the proportion of ratings between the dichotomously coded categories (theme not present vs. theme is present). Because it is quite likely that the number of themes not present will greatly exceed the number of themes present in any given mission statement, Cohen's Kappa was used to adjust for an inflated coefficient that would result from using a simple percent agreement. It is important to note that Kappa is interpreted differently than a traditional reliability coefficient. "It should be noted carefully that K = 0 does not mean that the decisions are so inconsistent as to be worthless. K = 0 may be interpreted to mean that the decisions are no more consistent that decisions based on statistically

independent scores…A kappa value of .2 can be interpreted to mean that 20% of the total possible increase over chance consistency was observed for the decisions…" (Crocker & Algina, 1986, p. 201). Kvalseth (1991) suggests that a kappa coefficient of 0.61 represents "reasonably good" overall agreement.

At this point the researchers looked to an outside audience to further validate their coding scheme. Specifically, this was done to guard against any shared meaning the researchers may have generated amongst themselves that would yield the coding scheme highly reliable between the two researchers yet unreliable to the outside world (Krippendorff, 1980).

The inter-rater agreement amongst the research participants was carried out using 5 randomly selected mission statements for each cluster. Both the principal researchers (n=2) separately coded the mission statements using the major themes developed through the emergent coding. When the researchers compared their findings it was found that their overall inter-rater agreement (kappa) of the major themes was .76 (n=200)[4]. Specifically, the reported agreement (kappa) for the major themes of elementary, middle, high school and college mission statements was .72, .91, .55 and .86, respectively.

The inter-rater agreement amongst the independent participants was also carried out using 5 randomly selected mission statements for each cluster. Four independent participants were given detailed written instructions and were asked to separately code the mission statements using the major themes and elements developed through the emergent coding. When the 4 independent participant's codes were compared, it was found that the overall inter-rater agreement of the major themes was .65 (n=200).

[4] Note that the n=200 refers to the number of categories coded. Twenty mission statements were coded, each of which contained a potential of 10 themes, 10*20 = 200.

Specifically, the rater agreement for the major themes of elementary, middle, high school and college mission statements was .69, .77, .49 and .63, respectively.

The intra-rater agreement was carried out using 2 coding sessions (approximately 8 weeks between them) for 5 elementary and 5 middle school mission statements. When the researchers compared the two coding sessions it was found that the overall intra-rater agreement of the classification of mission statement themes was .80 (n=100). Specifically, the intra-rater agreement for the major themes presented in elementary and middle schools was .68 and .91, respectively. Table 2 illustrates the various agreement ratings reported for the coding scheme of mission statements.

Table 2: *Cohen's kappa for agreement ratings of major themes in mission statements across clusters*

Reliability Type	**Elementary**	**Middle**	**High**	**College**
Inter-rater (2 researchers)	**.72** (n=50)	**.91** (n=50)	**.56** (n=50)	**.86** (n=50)
Inter-rater (4 independent participants)	**.69** (n=50)	**.77** (n=50)	**.49** (n=50)	**.63** (n=50)
Intra-rater	**.68** (n=50)	**.91** (n=50)	-	-

After consulting the literature, we feel confident that our coding scheme is reliable enough to make meaningful and accurate empirical quantifications of school mission statements.

Coding Scheme

Table 3 illustrates the coding scheme developed for use in this study. Through the techniques of emergent coding and content analysis, the researchers extracted ten

major themes along with their corresponding thematic elements articulated in mission statements. Note that each thematic element represents a measurable construct.

Table 3: The mission statement coding scheme

A) COGNITIVE/ACADEMIC 0 – Misc. 1 – foster cognitive development/academic skills 2 – problem solving skills 3 – develop/promote/instill creativity 4 – research	**F) SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT** 0 – Misc. 1 – safe environment 2 – consistent environment 3 – person centered environment 4 – technological environment
B) SOCIAL 0 – Misc. 1 – promote social interaction	**G) SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY** 0 – Misc. 1 – provide religious education and environment
C) CITIZENSHIP/VOCATIONAL 0 – Misc./Vocational 1 – productive citizen 2 – responsible citizen 3 – public service	**H) LOCAL COMMUNITY** 0 – Misc. 1 – Promote community 2 – Community partnership
D) PROMOTE PHYSICAL 0 – Misc. 1 – promote physical development	**I) GLOBAL COMMUNITY** 0 – Misc. 1 – appreciation for diversity/culture 2 – instill global awareness 3 – adaptive students in a diverse society
E) ATTITUDE/VALUES/EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT 0 – Misc. 1 – positive student attitudes 2 – ethical consciousness/morality 3 – joy for learning 4 – life-long learning 5 – self-sufficient students 6 – self-discipline 7 – reach potential/discover won talents 8 – emotional skills 9 – promote confidence/self-esteem/self-worth 10 – spiritual development	**J) FACULTY/STAFF** 0 – Misc. 1 – challenging environment 2 – nurturing environment 3 – provide engaging work/develop active learners

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RESULTS

Table 4 lists the results of the content analysis across clusters. Using the framework developed through emergent coding and tested for reliability, the researchers systematically coded 267 mission statements. By separately analyzing each cluster, it was possible to compare the percentage of categories present amongst each type of school. Tabulations were made on the frequency of occurrence for each of the ten major themes. This is listed as the "Total" for each category in Table 4 and represents the number of unique occurrences of any major theme in a mission statement. In addition to the total tabulation, the researchers also recorded the occurrence of various thematic elements within each of the ten major coding themes. Because a school may have a mission statement containing multiple thematic elements, the "Total" for each major theme reflects the number of schools that listed one or more of the elements. In this case the term "Total" refers to the overall occurrence of a particular theme in a mission statement, not the sum of the elements. Table 4 illustrates the percentage of major themes as well as thematic elements present in the mission statements of elementary schools, middle schools, high schools and colleges.

Table 4: *Major Themes with thematic elements by school level*

	Elementary N=59 PERCENT	Middle N=49 PERCENT	High N=59 PERCENT	College N=100 PERCENT
COGNITIVE/ACADEMIC = A				
0 Misc.	2	10	7	10
1 foster cog. dev.	66	67	32	70
2 problem solving	14	16	8	12
3 creativity	5	8	2	19
4 research	0	2	0	27
Percent of Total	**69**	**76**	**38**	**83**
SOCIAL = B				
0 Misc.	8	14	3	4
1 social interaction	15	18	3	15
Percent of Total	**24**	**33**	**5**	**19**
CITIZENSHIP / VOCATIONAL = C				
0 Misc.	7	8	7	17
1 productive	10	14	17	16
2 responsible	19	24	15	21
3 public service	0	0	2	35
Percent of Total	**36**	**39**	**35**	**68**
PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT = D				
0 Misc.	2	6	2	0
1 physical dev.	15	16	5	11
Percent of Total	**17**	**22**	**7**	**11**
ATTITUDES/VALUES/EMOTION = E				
0 Misc.	20	27	12	16
1 pos. attitudes	12	20	7	4
2 ethical morality	7	6	8	12
3 joy for learning	8	8	3	3
4 life-long learning	31	18	18	25
5 self-suffucient	2	0	3	2
6 self-discipline	3	2	3	0
7 reach potential	27	20	17	9
8 emotional skills	2	2	0	0
9 promote confidence	24	14	7	1
10 spiritual dev.	8	0	5	27
Percent of Total	**81**	**76**	**52**	**62**
SCHOOL = F				
0 Misc.	10	8	7	9
1 safe	12	35	10	3
2 consistent	3	8	0	0
3 person centered	2	4	0	9
4 technological	5	2	0	6
Percent of Total	**24**	**47**	**15**	**24**
SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY = G				
0 Misc.	0	0	0	1
1 religious ed/env.	10	0	8	31
Percent of Total	**10**	**0**	**8**	**32**
LOCAL COMMUNITY = H				
0 Misc.	5	4	7	9
1 promote comm.	7	8	7	18
2 comm. Partnership	19	24	18	23
Percent of Total	**27**	**35**	**32**	**43**
GLOBAL COMMUNITY = I				
0 Misc	2	4	0	8
1 appreciation diversity	17	8	7	36
2 global awareness	7	2	5	10
3 adaptive students	7	20	17	6
Percent of Total	**31**	**33**	**27**	**47**
FACULTY/STAFF = J				
0 Misc.	15	14	15	15
1 challenging env.	5	18	8	6
2 nurturing env.	20	20	10	5
3 provide engaging work	12	8	7	3
4 faculty qualifications	5	6	3	12
Percent of Total	**41**	**51**	**32**	**34**

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Table 5 illustrates how the frequency of the major themes shifts across the four clusters. This table ranks the major themes from those occurring most frequently in the mission statements to those occurring least frequently. Notice that Emotional development is the dominant purpose of school for the sample of K-12 schools analyzed. Also note how the focus shifts as children progress in their schooling. The higher levels of schooling tend to emphasize academic development and good citizenship in their mission statements, while the lower levels of school focus more upon emotional development.

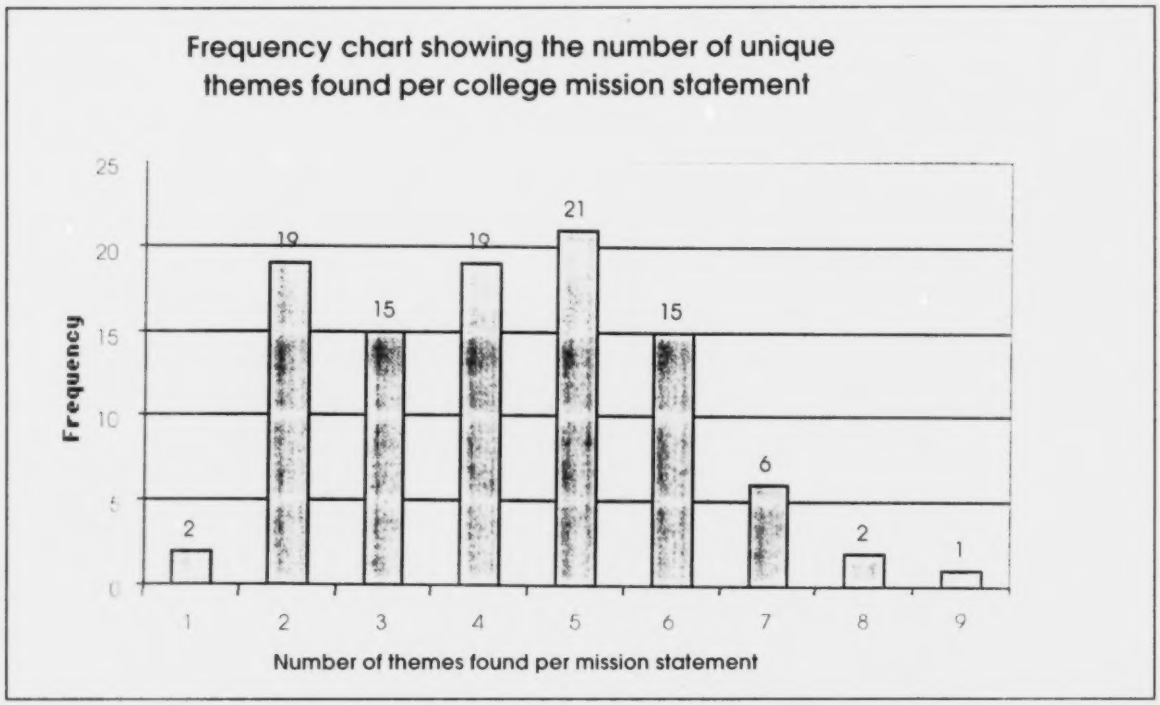
Table 5: *Most frequently occurring themes across clusters (n=267)*

Frequency	**Elementary** *(n =59)*	**Middle** *(n =49)*	**High** *(n = 59)*	**College** *(n = 100)*
Most Frequent	Emotional Academic Faculty	Emotional Academic Faculty	Emotional Academic Citizenship	Academic Citizenship Emotional
	Citizenship Global Comm Local Comm School	School Citizenship Local Comm Global Comm	Local Comm Faculty Global Comm School	Global Comm Local Comm Faculty Spiritual
Least Frequent	Social Physical Spiritual	Social Physical Spiritual	Spiritual Physical Social	School Social Physical

Applying the coding scheme, it was found that there was a great deal of variability across schools regarding the number of themes incorporated in their mission statement. To use colleges (n=100) as an example, the number of themes incorporated by a college in its mission statement approximates a normal distribution with a mean of 4.23

and a standard deviation of 1.7 (see Figure 1). In other words, very few schools are only emphasizing a single theme or 9 different themes in their missions.

Figure 1: *Frequency by number of themes*



To better illustrate the inherent richness of the mission statement we have selected 4 examples of college mission statements to present. These statements are taken from 4 very different colleges used in our analysis and, as such, highlight the range of content found throughout the sample of mission statements drawn. Additionally, by including the codes that were applied to the mission statement it is possible for the reader to develop a better understanding of how the coding scheme was applied. The coding themes extracted are shown in parentheses after the keyword that triggered the code. Note that some sentences have no code and some sentences have several codes.

Illustrative Cases

Example #1

Appalachian State University
http://www.appstate.edu/www_docs/depart/irp/factbook/asumssn.html

Mission Statement

Appalachian State University is a public comprehensive university, offering a wide variety of degree programs at the baccalaureate, master's, and intermediate levels as well as the Ed.D. in Educational Leadership. With a distinctively residential campus and a faculty and staff (**J0**)characterized by high quality and broad diversity of professional skills, Appalachian takes as its mission the practice and propagation of scholarship (**A1**). This is accomplished particularly through instruction (**J0**), but also through the research (**A4**), creative (**A3**), and service activities (**C3**) of the university community. Appalachian is committed to excellence in its undergraduate and graduate educational programs, while continuing to serve as a center of cultural and professional activity within its state and region (**H1**).

Coding: A1, A3, A4, C3, H1, J0

Example 1 illustrates a very typical college mission statement. The statement emphasizes four of the most frequently occurring major themes. Upon reviewing the mission statement for Appalachian State University, the reader should get an idea for why the particular coding categories listed were chosen. Coding theme A represents the cognitive factor and elements 1, 3, and 4 represent a mention of "fostering cognitive development", "creativity", and "research" in particular. Category C3 is the citizenship/vocational theme and in particular the "public service" element. Category H1 represents a reference

to "community involvement" and category J0 represents a miscellaneous reference to the "faculty".

Examples 2 and 3 illustrate how school mission statements can vary greatly across institutions.

Example #2

Geneva College
http://www.geneva.edu/graphics/whoweare/index.html

Mission Statement

The mission of Geneva College is to educate and minister to a diverse community of students for the purpose of developing servant-leaders, transforming society for the Kingdom of Christ (**E10**). We accomplish this through biblically-based programs and services marked by excellence and anchored by the historic, evangelical, and reformed Christian faith (**G1**). The curriculum is rooted in the liberal-arts and sciences, vocationally focused (**C0**), and delivered through traditional and innovative programs.

Coding: E10, G1, C0

We can see from example #2 that Geneva College places a strong emphasis on the religious component of the college experience that their institution is able to offer. This school is emphasizing the emotional development theme with a specific focus on the element of spiritual development. The school also seems to be trying to convey the message that students will be exposed to a spiritual community. Thus, even as students are encouraged to grow spiritually as individuals, they will find support from a spiritual community. Notice that there is no explicit discussion of fostering cognitive

development, though it may be implied. The focus of the school mission centers upon spiritual development.

Contrast the mission of Geneva College with the mission statement of the University of Phoenix, listed in Example #3. The emphasis of the University of Phoenix mission is upon the cognitive/academic component.

Example #3

University of Phoenix

http://www.uophx.edu/uop/ourunive.htm#OUR MISSION

Our Mission

The University of Phoenix is a private, for-profit higher education institution whose mission is to provide high quality education to working adult students. The University identifies educational needs and provides, through innovative methods including distance education technologies, educational access to working adults regardless of their geographical location. The University provides general education and professional programs that prepare students to articulate and advance their personal and professional goals.

The University's educational philosophy and operational structure embody participative, collaborative, and applied problem solving strategies (**A2**) that are facilitated by a faculty whose advanced academic preparation and professional experience help integrate academic theory with current practical application (**J0**). The University assesses both the effectiveness of its academic offerings and the academic achievement of its students (**A1**), and utilizes the results of these assessments to improve academic and instructional quality.

Coding: A1, A2, J0

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It is interesting to note that the University of Phoenix mission statement places a heavy emphasis on distance learning, which is not surprising since this mission strongly emphasizes the cognitive domain. Specifically, the school mission statement emphasizes "fostering cognitive development" as well as "problem solving skills".

Finally, Example #4 is intended to illustrate that although some college mission statements are highly specialized, on rare occasions (less than 10%, see Figure 1), colleges incorporate a large number of major themes in their mission statement.

Example #4

Johnson C. Smith University
http://www.jcsu.edu/purpose.html

The mission of Johnson C. Smith is to provide an outstanding education for a diverse group of talented and highly motivated students from various ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographical backgrounds (**I1**). Johnson C. Smith offers a liberal education in conjunction with concentrated study in specialized fields in preparation for advanced study and specific careers. The University endeavors to produce graduates who are able to communicate effectively, think critically, learn independently as well as collaboratively, and demonstrate competence in their chosen fields (**A1**). Further, it provides an environment (**F0**) in which students can fulfill their physical (**D1**), social (**B1**), cultural, spiritual (**E10**), and other personal needs in which they can develop a compelling sense of social and civic responsibility (**C2**) for leadership and service (**C3**) in a dynamic, multicultural society. Likewise, the University embraces its responsibility to provide leadership, service, and lifelong learning (**E4**) to the larger community (**H1**). Regarding teaching effectiveness as paramount in its educational enterprise, Johnson C. Smith has a commitment to the recruitment and retention of an outstanding faculty (**J0**). To this end, the University promotes faculty development, encourages faculty involvement in research and other creative activities, and endorses the principles of academic freedom. To insure the integrity and stability of its status and the perpetuation of its rich legacy, Johnson C. Smith University has a firm resolve to maintain the fiscal and human resources requisite to be a truly distinctive institution--a hallmark of excellence in its students, faculty, staff, administrators, academics and other programs, facilities, operations, and environment.

Coding: A1, B1, C2, C3, D1, E4, E10, F0, H1, I1, J0

In short, the mission of John C. Smith University emphasizes multiple facets of the college experience. It is interesting to note, however, that the only one of the ten themes not included in this mission statement was the spiritual community theme. The statement mentions the spiritual needs of students, but does not attempt to present the school as a spiritual community.

In reading through these mission statements, ask yourself, does the mission seem congruent with the school practices? What type of student you would expect to find at each of these colleges? What role do admissions factors play in shaping institutional identities? Would you be surprised to find that each of these schools requires applicants to take the SAT in order to gain admission?

DISCUSSION

Popular opinion has suggested that little "real" information about a school can be found in a school mission statement (Flake, 1997). Consequently, many people have dismissed mission statements as containing nothing more than empty rhetoric. If this was the case, a study of mission statements would find nearly all mission statements saying basically the same things. This study has found quite the opposite: mission statements are a unique as well as a systematic statement reflecting the school's ideals and operations. Furthermore, mission statements present an easily and publicly available window into the stated purpose of school.

The current research study has examined 267 mission statements from elementary, middle, high school and colleges. Through the technique of content analysis via emergent coding the researchers found that school mission statements generally

emphasized one or more of ten major themes. Using these themes, we have analyzed the extent to which mission statements are similar and the extent to which they are different. This study also investigated the extent to which the major themes change over the levels of schooling.

Major findings

The first major finding is that schools within and between each cluster vary in both the number and the types of themes that were incorporated in their mission statement. Thus we can reject the first null hypothesis that all schools are saying the same thing in their mission statements. Although most schools tended to emphasize four or five different themes in their mission statement[1], *the majority of school mission statements focused specifically upon cognitive development, emotional development, and fostering effective citizenship/vocational preparation*. The frequency of the number of themes in mission statements approximated a normal distribution in each cluster.

Although there were dominant themes that cut across all schools, each school seemed to have a unique character as a result of the number and combination of themes emphasized in their mission statement. There were several different combinations of purpose found in this analysis but the bottom line is that different schools employed different combinations of purpose that reflected their own particular values system. Thus, the first major hypothesis of this study (that schools vary on their stated purpose) was confirmed by the empirical data.

[1] The researchers evaluated mission statements that varied in length from a few sentences to several pages and found that the length of the statement did not necessarily impact the number of themes emphasized.

Remarkably, often touted educational catchphrases such as "life-long learner", "public service", "community partnership", "appreciate diversity", and "research" each occurred in less than 36% of the college mission statements. This further counters the argument that college mission statements are all stating the same things. Also, it is worth considering that perhaps what is not being stated in a school mission statement is equally as important as what is being stated. The fact that a particular school mentions every major theme except spiritual community is indeed quite revealing.

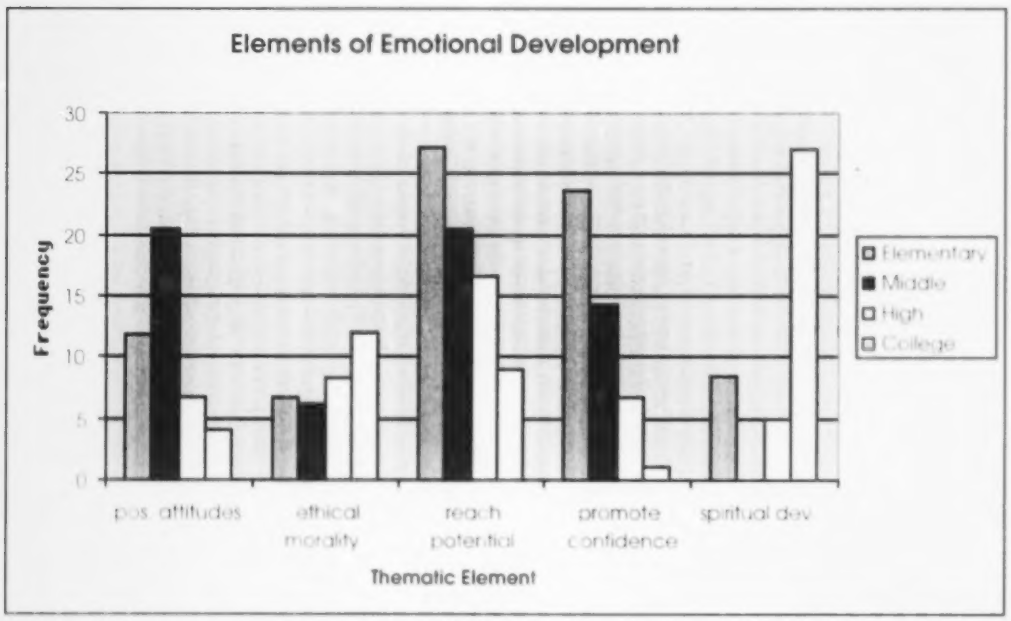
With regard to our second hypothesis, that schools mission statements will differ somewhat systematically over school levels, the results of our analysis strongly suggest that this is the case. *The results of this study suggest that the purpose of school, as evidenced by mission statements, shifts from emotional development to cognitive development as students progress through school.* In particular, elements of emotional development are emphasized in 81% of elementary school mission statements, however, only 62% of colleges are incorporating elements of emotional development into their mission. Conversely, elements of cognitive development are mentioned in 69% of elementary schools, yet 83% of college mission statements emphasize some element of cognitive development. Middle schools tend to bridge the gap in that 76% of middle schools mentioned emotional development as a major theme and 76% of middle schools mentioned cognitive development as a major theme.

In fact it is quite interesting to note how these terms are incorporated into school mission statements through the different levels of school (see Table 1). These findings lead the researchers to conclude that these educational terms are not just throw away phrases that schools incorporate into their mission statements without much thought. If

that was the case, then the sample would be saturated with such statements. Rarely (n=2) did any one element exist in over 50% of the mission statements (exceptions were "foster cognitive development" and "faculty").

Differences in the thematic elements over clusters were also observed. One such example of this type of finding is within the emotional development theme. Specifically, when comparing college mission statements to the other clusters, we witness a dramatic increase in the occurrence of "spiritual development" while concepts of "reaching potential" and "promotion of confidence" show linear drops from elementary school to college. This shifting of the various elements of the emotional theme across clusters is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: *How elements of emotional development shift across clusters*



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Other between groups differences were observed amongst the clusters by the researchers (citizenship, environment, etc.) but are not further discussed in this paper for the sake of brevity.

Limitations

At this point, it is worth noting some of the limitations of this study. One clear criticism that may be advanced is the way the authors chose to operationally define the purpose of school. We acknowledge that using a school mission statement may be an overly simplistic approach, particularly given that there is marginal evidence that schools themselves all view their mission statements as a reflection of their beliefs about the purpose of school. Nevertheless, we believe that there is something to be gained from using a common yardstick for measurement, and a mission statement at least has face validity.

A second limitation of the study is that it gives no insight into the degree to which schools are emphasizing certain themes. The coding scheme developed for this study is dichotomous in nature and therefore does not give the coder the discretion to comment on the degree to which certain elements are emphasized in the mission statement. The researchers intended this analysis as a step toward the empirical documentation and analysis of educational mission statements. Further studies may follow in which the degree of presence or absence is investigated as it has been determined that variation does indeed exist between schools.

A third limitation stems from the fact that the rater agreement (see Table 2) solely addresses the inter-rater and intra-rater agreement of the 10 major themes. After the data

was collected it was found that the various thematic elements were also illuminating in further understanding the mission statement. In future studies it would be beneficial to document the rater agreement of these elements which provided such insight into the final data analyses.

Other limitations are concerned with the sample which may in fact be truly described as schools and universities with developed web pages. We did not look at mission statements for schools which did not have web sites and of the group sampled, we only could analyze the mission statements of the schools in which we found missions. Although in the methodology we report relatively low percentages on the number of schools from which we found mission statements (Table 1), this number is the product of many of factors. For instance, some of the schools listed in our sampling pool had bad links or server problems. Other schools did not post a mission statement, but did post other similar documents such as school statements, objectives, or goals which were not included in our analysis. It is worthwhile to compare the yield rate of mission statements obtained via the world wide web to the study by Harvanek and Berleur (1997) in which the mission statements and related documents were requested through the mail. These researchers obtained a response rate of only 38%. Thus, the yield rates from the present study (23% elementary, 19% middle, 22% high school, and 53% college) are not far from the prior research in the area, especially considering that a more stringent criteria was applied to the current study (only mission statements were analyzed).

Despite many of the limitations that accompany the present study, we feel that we have contributed to the methodology of computer-age research while providing insight into a current issue in the field of education. Utilizing the web as a research tool is a new

possibility for researchers and one that we have used effectively. The future potential for web-based research seems promising.

Conclusions

The Introduction to this paper outlined several different philosophical positions regarding the purpose of school. In the past, four major themes have tended to dominate the discussion - emotional development, cognitive development, social development, and citizenship/vocational preparation. It was noted earlier that none of these four themes has remained dominant as the sole purpose of school for any extended period of time. In other words, the purpose of schools and schooling in America means different things to different people and tends to shift over time.

The results of this study suggest that these differing views are still present at all levels of schooling from elementary through college. The results illustrate that these dominant themes can be extracted from the mission statements of schools. As stated earlier, the most dominant theme of K-12 education in the present era (as reflected by the mission statements) is emotional development. Again, the college mission statements emphasized intellectual development as their primary purpose with emotional development less prevalent. Based upon the current analysis, it is apparent that there is a shift in the emphasis of K-12 to colleges from generally being emotionally-based to academically-based.

Interestingly, current policy discussions in the educational world have shifted away from emotional development and towards cognitive and academic development in the K-12 clusters. This phenomenon is easily evidenced through observing the academic

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standards movement and the widespread development and proliferation of state testing programs. Similarly, many states are now requiring students to pass graduation exams in order to get a diploma, signaling the changing tide in the main emphasis of K-12 schools moving away from emotional development and closer to cognitive and academic development. These developments have yet to dominate what we have found schools to have stated as their "mission". It will be of great interest to replicate an analysis of K-12 mission statements in the future to further document this recent and widespread shift.

Contributions

The usefulness and meaning found in mission statements, coupled with their ease of availability and brevity, make them a useful document for empirically examining the purpose of schools. If the current research has done nothing else, it is our hope that we have taken the first steps to "demystify the mission statement" by illustrating the descriptive characteristics of the mission statement. Furthermore, the present study has demonstrated that the analysis of mission statements through content analysis with emergent coding strategies can be done with an acceptable degree of rater agreement/reliability.

The findings of the present study lead to a host of interesting policy questions. Some of these questions enter into context of college admissions. For instance, if the mission statement of an institution is a statement describing the kind of person they would like to attract, what variables do schools use to assess whether or not a given student fits into the culture of their school? If a mission statement is a statement of what kind of students the school wishes to produce, then what indicators should schools use in

order to measure this and insure that the school is fulfilling its mission? And finally, what does it mean to directly compare schools who have different missions? Consider the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings for a moment. Is it advisable to attempt a ranking of all colleges when it is unclear whether or not these schools are trying to achieve the same ends? The results of this study suggest that it may be more logical to evaluate the extent to which a particular school is fulfilling its stated purpose and to compare only schools who share a similar mission.

The results of this study suggest that it is indeed possible to take a school mission statement out of the realm of the rhetorical and place it into the realm of measurement. Using empirical methods such as content analysis, we can keep watch over the changing purpose of school in American society and use this evidence to generate a discussion about the direction American education should be going. This study provides an empirical basis that will inform such a discussion.

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